

**STATEMENT OF
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NEW JERSEY HEALTH CARE SYSTEM
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee: It is an honor to appear before you today. This Committee's innovation, passion, and bipartisan effort have produced legislation that has meant life to thousands of veterans. At a local level, I have been incredibly fortunate to work in a Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) that has matched that commitment by making service to the homeless a priority. Not only has the VISN maintained funding support, but it has created an environment where innovation is encouraged, leading to the development of exciting new rehabilitation opportunities.

Homelessness is a terrible symptom of the corrosive effects of substance abuse and mental illness. These chronic, life-threatening disorders need to be addressed with the same urgency as any other serious illness. At a time when our medical outlays are soaring, the secondary effects of drug and alcohol abuse account for a large percentage of U.S. medical expenditures. If these dollars had been spent on earlier mental health interventions, costs would be lower and the toll on lives would be reduced.

An increasingly common outcome for impoverished substance abusing veterans is prison. Our jails are filled with drug offenders. A recent study found that 80% of New Jersey's inmates have substance abuse disorders, yet only 10% receive treatment. Often when they are released from prison, still untreated, they return to environments where they cannot find work and face the prospect of homelessness. Fully half of the veterans we treat in VA New Jersey Homeless Services have felony histories. Almost every homeless veteran we treat has a

substance abuse disorder. Furthermore, substance abuse has ripple effects that tear apart families, creating a cycle of neglect and poverty. VISN 3 is actively involved in outreach to incarcerated and paroled veterans. We expect these promising initiatives to reduce recidivism and prevent homelessness.

At times the breadth of challenges facing homeless veterans can seem insurmountable. Focusing only on problems and barriers can cause us to lose the sense of vision needed to make a difference. Fortunately, there are solutions available to us that can save lives. Everyday VA helps veterans who feel they are lost and without hope rediscover their humanity. Given the magnitude of homeless veterans needing our care, it is a major challenge for VA to establish the capacity to meet the needs of all these individuals.

It is misery that brings homeless veterans to our door. Sick, tired, and hungry, these men and women come to us seeking relief. Attending to their immediate, essential needs is only the start of the recovery process. In any intervention addressing homelessness, housing naturally plays a critical role. However, as the veterans sitting here today have shown me, addressing homelessness requires far more than a place to live. These veterans have taught me that our focus cannot simply be on the mechanics of developing housing. We must set our sights on what all men seek—meaning and through that sense of meaning, hope and happiness. Research suggests that there are three main components to happiness: spirituality, purpose (usually derived from work), and a sense of belonging (derived from family and/or friends). We have worked with a singular focus to provide our veterans with these tools. Through different paths, the veterans sitting with me today have played active roles in giving back to others. They all hold jobs that allow them to mentor others and experience a sense of purpose. They have all gone through a process of discovering themselves and their inner strengths.

VISN 3 has emphasized a comprehensive and coordinated approach to

rehabilitation by organizing an integrated Network of Homeless Veterans Programs. This service line has pioneered vocational rehabilitation programs that have produced opportunities to gain living wage careers. You will hear from the veterans seated here about their own unique paths and how they found their way not only out of homelessness, but also how they found a sense of purpose. O'Craftsman Contractors, opened by Ralph Owens, has allowed us to develop a construction business—one that has now rehabilitated almost 100 units of housing for homeless veterans. Robert Valentino, the Marketing Director of Moving America's Veterans into Employment and Residences In the Community (MAVERIC) and Manager of the Golf Driving Range at the Lyons Campus of the VA New Jersey Health Care System, directs a business that now generates revenues capable not only of employing veterans but also generating sufficient funds to open new businesses and housing. Thaddeus McNair, as a nursing assistant trainee, may soon be helping other veterans struggling with serious physical problems and may ultimately pursue a career as a registered nurse. I cannot thank these veterans enough for the caring they have shown and the inspiration they have elicited in others.

I also want to give my personal thanks to Pat Troy, the Associate Director for Patient Care Services at the VA in New Jersey. He saw a unique opportunity to help the veterans we serve while developing candidates to fill desperately needed nursing assistant positions at the VA Medical Center. He launched the innovative nursing assistant training program that has involved 15 formerly homeless veterans, including Thaddeus McNair.

Not all of the skills taught to the veterans we serve need to be offered by the VA. Thanks to our community partnerships, we can offer a range of interventions that help veterans attain their goals. A wonderful program offered by Craig Panzano at a local YMCA, called the Adventure Program, teaches veterans just off the street trust and communication skills. It also helps them to bond as a unit—once again a part of a squad working together to accomplish a mission.

For the past several years, we have worked with Mike Armstrong of Community Hope to develop VISN 3's first housing for seriously mentally ill veterans. This project is supported by a VA per diem grant, as well as over \$600,000 in funding from the State and County. If it wasn't for the active involvement of many interested and caring participants, this project could have never taken place. Kenneth Mizrach, my Director, made an empty hospital building available to Community Hope so this project could move forward. United States Congressman Rodney Frelinghuysen advocated with Federal, County, and State officials, helping the project secure critically needed funding.

The incoming New Jersey State Commander of the American Legion, Jim Viliard, and the Commander of the American Legion Auxiliary, Penny Kraus, have launched a bold new initiative to create transitional housing for homeless veterans. They expect to raise \$100,000 over the next year. This initiative not only creates essential housing, but it also energizes others to action. This "can-do" spirit, if matched in other states, could have a significant and lasting impact on resources available to help homeless veterans.

Working with Carroll Thomas, the Middlesex County Economic Opportunity Corporation (MCEOC) and Veterans Industries have been able to open several businesses, a furniture store, a golf driving range, a greenhouse, a bagel shop and a transportation system. These businesses have employed scores of veterans.

MCEOC is also a Head Start provider. Its expertise in working with children has led us to develop one of the only VA housing programs that has the capacity to serve women and children. MCEOC will open a ten-unit transitional residence housing women and, if space is available, their children sometime this summer. Carroll Thomas's vision, innovation, and commitment to homeless veterans has produced transformational changes in the rehabilitative services the VA can

provide. Initiatives such as these, coupled with VA's plan to make grants to assist special needs populations (women, including women with children, chronically mentally ill, frail elderly and terminally ill) will do much to address the needs of the growing female veteran population.

These programs can be replicated at other VA's. They offer a source for meaningful opportunity and a reason for hope.

Thank you for your time. I will be happy to respond to questions from the Committee.